



Valley Broadcast Legends

Oral Histories

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Oral interview of

Lou Coppola

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Interviewer: Vic Biondi

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Lou Coppola spent almost a half-century in broadcasting, including as a successful sales executive. He first worked for Armed Forces Radio in Korea for two years, then spent the rest of his career with Sacramento's KCRA AM/KCTC FM. At the time of Lou's retirement in 1996, KCRA AM had been sold and was KGNR AM. Lou created two audience on-air promotion programs in the '80s and '90s, a worldwide travel talk program and the staging of big band music dances with the Glenn Miller and Tommy Dorsey Legend bands. After retiring, Lou founded the Northern California Big Band Music Preservation Society, which staged monthly dances featuring local Sacramento bands and orchestras.

Lou Coppola: Buongiorno. I'm a guy who was an immigrant who came to America in 1930 and didn't know a bit of English, but I know what it's like to be able in this country with all the opportunities it gave me in my career. This is Lou Coppola, who came here with his parents and went through the local schools and did everything that one could be given the opportunity to do, and I was in all kinds of things that made my life interesting and, I hope, interesting for others in radio and entertainment as it comes to us. I loved the period that I was a great part of, and I loved being able to please you.

[00:01:11]

VicBiondi: Tell me what you remember about when you left Italy to come to the United States.

[00:01:19]

Coppola: I couldn't remember a thing. I actually—because once we got and I got Americanized by Mrs. Hoy [phonetic] and a second-grade teacher, all I did was [*speaks Italian*], okay? But after first grade and second grade, my mother said, "I want to learn English. Will you teach me English?" So I would repeat many of the things Mrs. Hoy told me, and my mother, in turn, would get the American *Contra Costa Gazette* and read it and ask me about each story.

[00:02:13]

Biondi: Do you remember the trip over on the boat?

[00:02:15]

Coppola: Nothing.

[00:02:15]

Biondi: You don't remember that.

[00:02:16]

Coppola: [*Italian word*].

[00:02:17]

Biondi: What's the first thing you remember about being in California?

[00:02:20]

Coppola: The first thing I remember that—oh, I got into trouble. I would—in the orchard of—see, the uncle wanted my father to work off his sponsorship, and so we had to live—and we’ve got a picture—at the house with me at the age of about four, and my mother with her apron on, and we’re standing against a wall, a barn wall, and that was where I remember is right in there that I was always giving my mother trouble. I was always in her way, you know, and my father didn’t want me around because—well, he didn’t want me around because he was usually running the horses for the orchard. He was doing all that orchard work.

So what I remember was the first terrible thing that came about, and that was because a good friend who was a friend of my mother’s, Mrs. Masoni [phonetic], who really took a liking to the family, and she had a son. She had two sons, but one of the sons was Guido Masoni. He has since passed away about three, four years ago. And Guido and I, we went down in the cellar of the uncle’s place, and we saw all the wine caskets, okay? Can you imagine? *[Laughs]*

[00:04:14]

Biondi: Yes, I know what you’re going to say.

[00:04:14]

Coppola: I’m four and a half or five years old, and Guido is only six or seven, he’s about three years older than me. And we said, “There’s nobody around. Let’s sample.” So we started sampling the wine.

[00:04:29]

Biondi: What happened?

[00:04:32]

Coppola: Terrible. I passed out. I passed out. And, boy, my father and mother panicked. They didn’t know what the hell to do. They didn’t know what to do, and so they said, “Let’s strap him on one of the cars,” and they strapped me to one of the cars with rope and so forth and so on. Clayton Valley Road was just the closest road, and they drove me back and forth, back and forth, and I’m with my head—I remember this. I remember going down in the cellar, but I don’t remember anything, and the ride I couldn’t remember because I was passed out.

[00:05:23]

Biondi: What were you like in school when you first went to school there as a young boy? You said you were six years old.

[00:05:29]

Coppola: Yeah.

[00:05:30]

Biondi: What was it like in grammar school for you?

[00:05:32]

Coppola: Well, it was tough. The only thing I enjoyed was really play. I remember I had in those days what we called clodhoppers. They were not regular loafer shoes, but they were things that you'd use out in the fields, okay? And I had to have overalls, which you tied at the top, and the clodhoppers, and that limited me, and I didn't know a thing about sports. I had not even got an inkling of sports. I got an inkling of sports when I was in probably the fourth grade. I really took a liking to baseball and soccer. We didn't call it—we called it kickball. That's what it was called. And that's my first attempt at, in a sense, being athletic.

[00:06:38]

Biondi: But they all of a sudden realized that you could sing, huh?

[00:06:42]

Coppola: Yeah, yeah.

[00:06:43]

Biondi: How did that happen?

[00:06:44]

Coppola: Fourth-grade teacher, Mrs. Davis. I never forget these wonderful people. Mrs. Davis said, "I'm going to teach you, everybody in the class, to sing language songs." [*Italian name of song*]. I can't remember them all. There were three big ones, one was Spanish, one was the Italian, and one was German, and so we learned these songs. She said, "If you learn these songs, then I'm going to give you a chance to learn how to dance." [*Italian phrase*]. And I thought it was fun, because that way you'd get to hold the girls, right?

[00:07:37]

Biondi: When did you start singing in church, though? You sang in church, too, didn't you?

[00:07:40]

Coppola: I started in church because we were Catholic and we went to an annual—the poster will show you, with my little four—my brother being four years young, and I'm getting my holy communion. There's a picture of me with the holy communion and the white thing. Just after that, the two nuns said—two nuns, I can't remember their names, but they said, "Emil, we want you to learn to sing in the church."

And I said, "[*Italian phrase*.] That's hard."

And they said, "Well, that's okay. That's okay. We work with you." So two or three days of each week when school was finished, I didn't go to play with the boys and other things, or go home. I went to church, and the nuns, one of them played the organ, the other one directed, and they said, "You're going to learn to sing the Latin Mass."

[00:08:56]

Biondi: And you did that for a long time, didn't you?

[00:08:59]

Coppola: I did. I did, about three years.

[00:09:01]

Biondi: Every Sunday?

[00:09:02]

Coppola: No, no, about one Sunday a month, they made me, because the other time, they made me learn to sing the choir portion, okay? But I didn't know the difference between—I wasn't a sight reader, so I couldn't understand the bass and the treble and all, I mean the tenors and the sopranos. I could hear them, but I didn't know what the sheet music. So I learned to memorize the words, the Latin words.

[00:09:38]

Biondi: What was it when you were in high school, you started to do PA announcing?

[00:09:44]

Coppola: Yeah.

[00:09:46]

Biondi: What was it? Did somebody say you had a good voice? Why did you do that?

[00:09:51]

Coppola: Well, I had gone through, with my voice, in the church, okay, that led to my listening to the pop radio songs, and I started to learn to sing the Spanish. [Sings in Spanish] so forth and so on.

[00:10:15]

Biondi: You've still got it, Lou. You still have it. You could still do it. *[Laughs]*

[00:10:17]

Coppola: Well, I could still do it. Well, I went back to the local Holy Spirit School here about six or seven years ago, and I went to the director and I said, "Your chorus is wonderful. It's just I'm so thrilled, because I can hear the harmony."

And as she talked to me, she says, "Do you sing?"

And I said, “Mm, no. [*Italian phrase*]” But I said, “Many years ago.”

“I want you to come to our chorus.” And so five years, I sang bass at the Holy Spirit Church, and I was then—

[00:11:02]

Biondi: You were about twelve then, huh?

[00:11:05]

Coppola: Eighty—no, no, no.

[00:11:08]

Biondi: Oh, you mean here.

[00:11:08]

Coppola: Here.

[00:11:09]

Biondi: Oh, okay.

[00:11:10]

Coppola: Here. I was eighty years old when I went back to sing.

[00:11:12]

Biondi: Did you think in high school when you were doing this announcing—

[00:11:12]

Coppola: Yeah, I’ll get to that.

[00:11:17]

Biondi: —that there was any radio? Did you understand you wanted to be in radio?

[00:11:21]

Coppola: Here’s how. I loved radio. I memorized all the programs, *One Man’s Family*, *The Fred Allen Show*, all those shows, but I had a favorite that I would listen, and I would listen to the orchestras after 9:00 o’clock and after that show that Carl [unclear] Morris [phonetic] wrote. Oh, what the hell was that name? Not *One Man’s Family*, that’s one of them, but there was one that—anyway, I started listening to the hotel orchestras playing from the Fairmont Hotel, from the Trianon Ballroom, from all the hotels, the Coconut Grove. And I thought, “Jeez, they need an announcer there who introduces the band leader, and if the band leader can’t talk, that guy introduces the next song,” for the remote that they were doing. That hooked me.

[00:12:40]

Biondi: Now, how did you decide when you graduated high school to go in the Merchant Marines? That's a totally different direction.

[00:12:48]

Coppola: Oh, sure. Let me tell you. That's a funny story. The funny part is I didn't want to go in the Army or Navy. All my buddies had signed up, and a couple of fellows who were Marines said, "Unless you want to fight and be really disciplined, join the Marines." A couple of my guys who were juniors in high school came back to talk at our high school. But I had had a help, and it twists into radio. I had had some help because I was singing with the chorus, and here's the twist. I was singing in the chorus of Howard Brubeck.

[00:13:36]

Biondi: Oh, yes.

[00:13:37]

Coppola: Howard Brubeck was a music director at Mt. Diablo High School, and he said, "I know you can sing, so you're going to have to sing with the chorus." And there was a guy who sang baritone, but I still was between a tenor and a baritone. And he said, "You can sing there," and they taught me sight music. I learned what the sight was for notes and the scale and everything. And from that, at the same time when I was a junior, I had a class in social studies, and because of the way I talked—and the first- and second-grade teachers gave me articulation. They showed me to slow down, talk slowly, understand the words, and pronounce and project the words. So I had this going for me, and that's when [*Italian phrase*].

[00:14:50]

Biondi: Is that when you decided you wanted to go in the Merchant Marines?

[00:14:52]

Coppola: No, no, this is the twist. What was her name? Oh, god. She was my social studies teacher, she was from Petaluma, and her good friend was Eve Arden, and she heard me speak in the class, answering questions, and says, "Emil." Because nobody knew me as Lou. They said, "Emil, you should go into radio."

[00:15:29]

Biondi: This was Eve Arden, *Our Miss Brooks*?

[00:15:33]

Coppola: No. That was her good friend who had grown up with her in Petaluma. And so she said, "Oh, yeah." And that's when I decided, "Okay, I'll think about that," but I wasn't—see, and the only thing I knew at that time really was that radio was run by corporations, and I had a wonderful counselor during high school who put me in the

commercial department. So not only did I have all the business background, and I love corporations, I thought it was nothing like being able to be with a big corporation and have good-paying job, and I wasn't twisted into getting into radio then. I wanted to be in business, and so I went through all of those high school days with the commercial background, and I was one of two guys in the high school who had all the girls he wanted because he was in their class. *[Laughter]*

[00:16:48]

Biondi: So how did you decide then to go to sea?

[00:16:51]

Coppola: Very simple. "Purser" is the magic word. I learned that the purser is the best job on a ship, because, number one, he's part of the entertainment department and he's also connected with the social deal of events and activities, and he keeps the books. He knows all the accounting things. The purser was my twist. So I asked around. They said, "Well, you don't want to go in the Navy or the Army. Why don't you think about the maritime service."

And I said, "I don't know anything about that."

"Ah. The maritime service has training schools in Long Beach and back east on the East Coast." So while I was learning a trade, so called, because they said, "In the maritime service you get to travel and you get the good pay." So I said, "I'll be a purser then, yes." I finished the thirteen-week class in December, and January the 1st, they closed Kings Point, New York, the purser school, and I was trapped. I couldn't go back there. And so the question was, "What do I do? What do I do? Well, I guess I'll have to go to sea and put up with that." But I didn't belong to any union. I didn't know anything about unions.

They said, "Well, you're not really for the unions. You don't want to get tied up with them, because then you have to go to the union hall to get your ship and all that stuff. No, no. You just sail nonunion."

So the first nonunion ship I could get was Sosony Vacuum. Sosony Vacuum, or Sosony Mobil, had a port connection in San Pedro, and they said, "Oh, we can get you on a tanker right away. Oh, yeah, you'll get a good job."

And I said, "Oh? Well, I'm going to out working outdoors?" And I couldn't swim.

[Laughter] And here I am going in the Merchant—

[00:19:25]

Biondi: You're going to sea and you couldn't swim. *[Laughs]*

[00:19:26]

Coppola: They had not taught us swimming at Kings Point—I mean at Long Beach. They'd only taught us how to row the boats and how to put on the life preserver.
[Laughs]

[00:19:40]

Biondi: So what was the two years like? What was it like for two years?

[00:19:43]

Coppola: Oh, it was wonderful, wonderful, because I had nice people that I met, and they looked out for me. The first guy who looked out for me was a captain of the tanker, because he said, "Lou, there is a lot of bad guys." He didn't say "Lou." "Emil, there's a lot of bad guys in the maritime service and in the Merchant Marine. So here's who you look out for, and I'll make sure that nobody onboard gives you any trouble. You'll be the mess man. You will light the fire in the ovens every morning at 4:00 a.m., and then you'll make sure they're ready for the cook, okay? And then he'll tell you what to do with certain things." So not only did I learn about cooking, but I had grown up with a mother who was and had been a professional cook in Ushio [phonetic] at the Colonia [phonetic] [Italian phrase], and so she had taught me great cooking, so I recognized when the cook was making good stuff or so forth. But we had gotten three weeks' supply of vegetables when we left San Pedro. We knew we were not going to stop any place along the way until we went to Sydney, Australia, thirty-three days at sea on a tanker that goes four knots, four knots. And we putt, putt, putted. But I, in that period of time, and the second ship that I got, which was a union ship, I put on 35 pounds. I went from 150 to 185, and I've got a picture of me in a sport coat where I'm alongside my dad, and I'm like this alongside of him. [Laughter]

[00:21:59]

Biondi: Big Italian boy. [Laughs]

[00:22:00]

Coppola: So I said, "Well, I can't do this."

I came back embarrassed with my mother. She said, "Oh, [Italian phrase]. Yeah, sure, you had a great time, eating."

"Yeah," I said, "steak. [Italian phrase] Every day we had beef steak."

And so we also had all the vegetables, but they ran out at the end of the third week, because we had thirty-three days, and we still had seven or eight days, and the captain would not stop at any island along the way.

[00:22:43]

Biondi: When did you decide it was time to go to college?

[00:22:46]

Coppola: When I came out of the sailors union in the Pacific, the union hall. That's when the bug came back about radio that had been planted by my social studies teacher, and it came back and it came back, and I said, "Yeah, I'm going to go to college." And so the question is, "Where am I going to go?" Because here I was in Concord, I'd never been to Berkeley, I don't have a college prep kind of a class. My stuff was all commercial. Where am I going to go?

So that summer when I got finished, I said, "Well, where am I going to go?" And I talked to my accounting teacher, who was a former naval guy who had gotten hurt and so he went to teaching accounting at Mt. Diablo. He said, "Lou," or, "Emil, you got all these As. You should go to Armstrong Business College and learn to be a—" Gee, isn't that terminology—

[00:24:02]

Biondi: An accountant?

[00:24:03]

Coppola: Yeah, but they have a name for it.

[00:24:06]

Biondi: CPA.

[00:24:07]

Coppola: UPA.

[00:24:07]

Biondi: UPA?

[00:24:08]

Coppola: CPA, a CPA. [*Italian phrase*] Yeah, a lot of good money. And I went to six weeks of that, and there were only six guys in the class that summer teaching accounting. I was doing P&L statements, I was doing corporation bookkeeping, and every sixth question was mine. I was trapped, twelve hours a day. He'd give us a chapter or at least a chapter and a question-answer thing every night, and we would sit there and we'd read it and memorize it, read it and memorize, practice penmanship, very important, you know. And at the end of it all, I said to him, "I don't want to be a CPA." [*Italian phrase*] Too hard.

So, in turn, that's when I fell back into radio, because, see, I knew I wasn't going to go into commercial stuff and I knew I wasn't going to go to sea again. So then the bug was planted by the social studies teacher that came about, and that's when I decided, "Okay, where am I going to go, where am I going to go?" And I checked around, and I found out that you didn't have to do all the breadth classes at San Francisco State. In Berkeley, you

had to take freshman English, many classes, you had to go and do all of those breadth things, English, you have to learn Shakespeare, all of those things before you could go to be a junior or senior with a major. San Francisco State had no majors. It had been a Teachers College, but it was now opening up and saying, "Okay, what do you guys want?"

So I got seventeen upper-division classes in two and a half years, seventeen classes, international trade, international law, all of those things that one could need or want. And I thought, "Oh, this is great." But only because Ray Doyle [phonetic] and Merle Landers [phonetic] were my two people who pushed me into the radio side did I think, "Well, I may get a degree. I may not. I need to get a degree."

And that's when the bug was planted by somebody that I knew of my guys, and they said, "There's a radio station, a new radio station, going to be built in Pittsburg, California."

"Oh, and how far is it from Concord?" [*Italian phrase*] I could stay at home and I could go to the radio station, and I could use what Mrs. Doyle or Ray Doyle had taught me. So I went to the two guys who were the owners, and they were terrible dumb SOBs. They didn't know anything about radio. One was a newspaper guy and the other guy was some kind of a flake. And all they knew was trade out, don't pay for anything, trade out for anything you can.

[00:28:12]

Biondi: Why did they hire you?

[00:28:14]

Coppola: Because I was young and because I had the background of San Francisco State, I knew how to engineer. So they said, "Okay, here's the way we're going to work it, Lou. You're going to be the only salesman. You'll have the entire county, Contra Costa County, as your oyster. You can go and sell in Martinez, Walnut Creek, Concord, Antioch." [*Italian phrase*]

[00:28:50]

Biondi: Who did you sell to?

[00:28:50]

Coppola: Everybody. Furniture store. The biggest furniture store in Antioch was Mahan's. The biggest store in—I'm trying to think—in Martinez, I had all these big accounts. And I sold also, very smartly, I sold entertainment places, because they had orchestras playing there, and guess what yours truly did on Friday and Saturday nights? Remotes, remotes, remotes. I had them lined up where I did a remote from Martinez, a Dixieland band, okay, playing from 8:30 to 9:00. And I would have time to go over to Concord and go to a little bar that had an organ there, but the guy played pop-type

music, and so he would do a fifteen- to thirty-minute piece. Then my other remote would be at Marcetti's [phonetic] Place in Antioch.

[00:30:02]

Biondi: Did you sell sponsors in those, those remotes?

[00:30:04]

Coppola: Oh, of course, of course. I mean, they were buying time, and yours truly was getting \$10 per remote. I was getting \$10 per remote, so I didn't mind it. You know what I did on Friday nights? Friday nights I'd start at the Pacheco Racetrack and I would broadcast. Because I was sports oriented, I would broadcast the Trophy Dash, because that's all they had there. There was no circular track, but they had the Trophy Dash.

[00:30:42]

Biondi: Let me ask you, when you had that first job and you sold all of that time, and obviously you were successful as a salesperson, what was it about you that made you such a good salesman?

[00:30:54]

Coppola: Well, I had to do that because I had worked, while I was going to high school, I worked for a thing called the *Diablo Beacon*, and it was a weekly newspaper that had one pressman and one owner. [Laughter] And they said, "Lou," or, "Emil, you're going to be our sports editor. Everything connected with sports in Concord you're going to write about, and I'm going to pay you five cents a word." [Laughter] Five cents a word. And I had taken, in high school, a course, what, typing, because that's something automatic required. I had three years of typing, and so I had the background of being an extrovert, and so everything I enjoyed, I'd learn about people's business.

[00:32:00]

Biondi: So what were you like? What was your personality like? Why were you able to sell so well?

[00:32:05]

Coppola: I was an A, a Type A, very simple.

[00:32:06]

Biondi: Which is? What were you like?

[00:32:08]

Coppola: Very aggressive. [Italian phrase]. Listen, so I'd let them talk. I'd trigger them to tell me all about their business, and then I'd say, "You guys really are missing the boat," and I'd tell what's possible, and I'd say, "I'm your friend, you know, and I'm not going to sell you anything that isn't going to do you any good." So by that type of thing, it made

me interested in sales, because I was being paid word, and I was learning about every business in town.

[00:32:54]

Biondi: So from that little radio station, then Uncle Sam knocked on your door. Tell us about that uniform you're wearing there. You were drafted then, what, 1950?

[00:33:08]

Coppola: I was drafted, and I was the second guy drafted out of Contra Costa County, the second guy. I was sent down to Fort Ord, and they didn't have a place for me, but they had a collecting point for all kinds of guys who were the first draftees for the Korean War. Because when the Korean War broke, the best thing our government could do in Japan was send the Japanese troops over there to help the South Koreans, and also they had reservists, Naval Reserves and other reserves here in the States, and they quickly got them tied in, too, and sent them over there. So they said, "What we need is we need more Fort Lewis kind of places, because there they're going to get the training in thirteen weeks, how to shoot the M-1, how to stay low under machine gun fire and levels, learn how to crawl. We'll teach them to be infantrymen." And where is the best infantry school in the West? They said, "Camp Carson."

"Camp Carson, Colorado?"

"Yeah, Colorado Springs." I'd never heard of Colorado Springs. They said to me on the seventh or eighth day, "You have orders to go to Camp Carson, Colorado."

[00:34:47]

Biondi: Is that when you became an instructor?

[00:34:49]

Coppola: Yeah. [*Italian word*], I had the thirteen weeks, friend, of the rugged forced marches, five-mile forced marches. I had PT training every morning, and when you were through with PT, there'd be your period time that you'd been in the kitchen, KP. All right? And then from that, they cherry-picked the guys that they wanted to go at the end of thirteen weeks right over to Korea, because they needed all kinds of help. The Korean triangle had just been sealed off near Pusan because they figured we couldn't fight the whole agricultural base up to Seoul. And then the South Koreans backed off, backed off, retreated, retreated. And, finally, with the help of our troops from Japan and our reservists, they made a perimeter that was really a good triangle, with Pusan as the escape route if we needed it. But they didn't. There was great resistance there.

So that's when I was told by my captain, "We're going to be going north. The troops are going to go north again as they break out of this triangle, and they need forward observers. And to do that, we're going to set up a company called Sound Rangers." Not forward observers, but sound rangers.

So I said, "Hmm. What's that?"

And they explained it. It's a unit that has a 35-pound metal tape recorder with a loop. And guess where you carry it? Like a backpack. And you go up on the lines and there's a string of you right across the perimeter area, and the other enemy has got the artillery on the other side, and they're going to lob in things. And by triangulation, we will know where they are.

[00:37:35]

Biondi: Is that what led to Armed Forces Radio?

[00:37:37]

Coppola: That's exactly what. I mean, it didn't lead to that, because somehow in some way, 8th Army in Camp Drake had put down my background, my college background at San Francisco State, and they had put in my one year work in radio. And that's when a Major Jones said, "We've got to build some mobile radio stations, mobile. We've got already a permanent station in Pusan, homesteader AFRS, but we need stations across the line, and we have to have a key station that is near 8th Army Headquarters," which was in Seoul. So they said, "We're going to put a permanent 1,000-watt transmitter in Seoul. We have a mobile station." And I've got a picture of the Air Force trailer that we used, and that was our studio. One trailer was the studio and one trailer was the typewriters and the other gear. And I've got pictures of me at the studio. We had a shortwave receiver that would bring in Los Angeles, shortwave Los Angeles, for our certain news about America, for baseball games, for some shows that were transmitted, because they were using tremendously powerful transmitters out of Los Angeles, AFRS Los Angeles. And that's how we got connected there.

"We need some key guys who know background," and of all the guys that they picked, they picked seven of us out of Daegu. They listened to what we knew in Daegu, which was where Major Jones was, and from that they deciphered, "Okay, Coppola, you're going up to there, and we're going to make you in charge of programming. But you're going to have to do a show every day, and you pick the time where you want to do it, but you've got to train those guys who are there." And there was only one guy who knew and been in radio. He'd been at KCBS in Los Angeles as a writer. *[Laughs]* He didn't know anything about spinning records, none of that stuff.

[00:40:34]

Biondi: So that's when you became a full-time serious radio person?

[00:40:39]

Coppola: Absolutely, because—

[00:40:41]

Biondi: That was going to be your life, radio.

[00:40:43]

Coppola: Because, with my background and with my [unclear] individual, I found out that, (a), the Army wanted to do a weekly newscast message from General Van Fleet. MacArthur had not had this, Ridgeway had not had this, but General Van Fleet, who had had great background in Italy and other places, he said, "We're going to send a message, but we have to have the stations along the 38th, three of them, and Seoul will be the originating point. And homesteader, we don't worry about them. They're way down there in Pusan, okay?"

So they said, "Okay. You go and record General Van Fleet. He's got a staff writer from *Los Angeles Times* by the name of—" I think it was something like McFarland. "And he will do the script for the general, and you will record him, and you'll critique him. You'll say, 'Look, let's do it again.'" And he knew me as Sergeant Lou.

[00:42:10]

Biondi: You were a sergeant by this time now?

[00:42:11]

Coppola: No. I wasn't a sergeant. I'm sorry; that came later. I was a corporal, but he treated me like, you know, Corporal Lou. That's what he said. I mean, Coppola, he didn't say, "Coppola, what do we do next?" He might say occasionally, but, no, we—and I say, "Sir," and then I went "General." "Call me General." And so we were on that basis, and I did that for a year.

[00:42:42]

Biondi: Now, when the service was over, and you were there two years—

[00:42:46]

Coppola: Yeah, I was there two years.

[00:42:47]

Biondi: —and it was time to get out, and you came home, what were you thinking and what did you decide you were going to do?

[00:42:54]

Coppola: I had communicated—friends that I worked down in Pittsburg, one guy was Jack Matranga. Matranga was program director of KECC, and he had said, "Lou, you don't want to go back to Pittsburg. You want to come to KGMS, my new station, in Sacramento."

I said, "Oh?" And I didn't know any better.

And he says, "Yeah, I have a good job for you."

Well, when I got out, I said, "Jeez, why should I go anyplace and go back and get a degree from SF State? No, no, no, I'll go right into radio."

And so Matranga hired me, and for six months I was chasing down the furniture stores and everybody else. I covered the Fox Theatre and the Crest Theatre and all the other things that—I had all kinds of dinky, rinky-dink accounts. *[Laughter]* And the funniest part is somehow I got connected with the Dr. Pepper Company. Not Coca-Cola, but the Dr. Pepper Company. And so they said, "Listen, we've got an idea. I think what you can do is you can be the Dr. Pepper check the refrigerator in people's homes."

"Really?"

"Yes. We'll pay them a dollar for every bottle that they've got in the refrigerator, and you and the other salesman, you will go around every day, and when Gene Nelson—. Do you remember Gene Nelson?"

[00:45:00]

Biondi: Yes. KYA.

[00:45:01]

Coppola: When Gene Nelson was the morning guy, okay, and Gene would do his little thing, he says, "Okay, stand by, because the Dr. Pepper Show is on the air, and make sure that your refrigerator is full because our people are circulating right through Sacramento, and, sure enough, they're going to come to your house." *[Laughter]*

That lasted one year. You know why? What we were using was considered—it wasn't a game, and so they couldn't pay us. There was something about it that the FCC didn't like, and so they wiped it out. They said, "You can't do that on radio anymore."

And I said, "Oh. Well, we can't do it. Jeez, I'm missing all this opportunity to pay out dollar bills." They gave us big dollars to give people when the commercial would ring the sound of the money coming out and making the sounds. So the Dr. Pepper Show was my Gene Nelson introduction.

We had also at the same time—that's when I got connected somehow in some way to the KYA owner. The owner not of KGMS, but I got connect—oh, I know what it was. I know what it was. See, I'm ahead of myself. I know I didn't want to go do any more sales work for Jack Matranga, because I knew he had veterans. Gene Nelson had come out of Hollywood, man-on-the-street kind of show, and the other guy, Burt Berry *[phonetic]*, all of the guys had real good experience. So I wasn't going to do any air work. So all I could look forward to was just sales. And I thought, "Oh, Christ, what am I going to do here?" And that's about that same time somehow the word got out that there was a guy by the name of Bill Ogden *[phonetic]* down in Burbank. And I said, "Oh, what's he do?"

"He teaches you to pass the four-hour test to be a first-class licensed man."

"Oh, okay. What do I have to do?"

"You have to pay him \$300, and he guarantees that you'll pass the test or else he'll keep you there until you do pass the test. He knows all the questions. And so you're going to learn how to memorize everything connected with algebra, everything you can possibly learn."

So I had to really bone up like you can't believe, because I had not had algebra in high school. I didn't know what the hell they were talking about.

He says, "Yeah, but you're going to learn what the verbiage is."

So I went down and said, "Goodbye, Jack. I'm going down to get a license."

And so for the early month of February of that next year, which was '53, I went to Bill Ogden, I passed the test in the first take that were four hours. First take, I passed it. Dave Fox [phonetic] was in the same class. Dave Fox passed it. And Dave had—he was working already and having a good job. I'm not sure. He had come from Idaho or one of those places, and he was trying to get ahead. And so we made a nice relationship. But the third, it was the funniest thing of all, because I'm from Concord, but there was a guy from Walnut Creek whose father owned a grocery store, and the old man said to him, he says, "Go down to Bill Ogden and get a license, and then you can get into radio. That's a lot better than being a clerk."

So Mel Quario [phonetic] said, "Oh, I think I'll go to Bill Ogden's school too." It took him six weeks to pass the FCC test. He had to take it a second time. He had to take it a third time before he could get that degree. Do you know who hired him, Mel Quario? Jack Matranga hired him for Channel 40, because he had a license. [Laughter] He didn't know anything about television.

[00:50:35]

Biondi: Is that when you got to Sacramento then, after you got that license?

[00:50:40]

Coppola: No. KYA had a guy—and I can't remember his name. I should look it up. He was the owner of KYA. And somehow the word got out to him that I had worked KECC and that I might be interested in his station that he has up in Oroville, okay? And why would I be interested in it? Well, because it's a small station, it's a small market, but you're really away from all that Bay Area stuff and things and conglomeration and competition. And so I talked to him, and he liked me, and he said, "Yeah, Lou—." "Emil," because I wasn't using "Lou" yet. Well, I'm sorry, I was, because when I was with AFRS,

that's when I changed my name in radio, okay, because "Lou" didn't mean anything in Pittsburg because I wasn't on the air much.

So the way it goes is that I'm talking to him and he says, "Yeah, I want you to handle the sales and I want you to do at least a show a day, but I really want you to organize and have the salespeople, because you'll have two salespeople under you, and you guys will hustle Butte County, and then you'll do everything else that's necessary to make the station profitable."

The ownership was the KYA guy. We're up there, and all of a sudden, he sells the station. He sells it to ten businessmen from a little town down in the Central Valley. I forget what the hell it was. And these ten guys can't get together on any decision-making, and so they hire a guy by the name of Byrd [phonetic], who was a real good engineer. He had been in the service, and he had known FM backwards and forwards. He knew AM and FM. And they knew that he says, "I can make that profitable if you let me bring my FM background in and we'll start doing remotes."

I said, "What?" I mean, the KYA, I says, "Yeah, sure, yeah, okay." So in telling them that there's a lot of potential with this Byrd in charge of engineering, he can also give assistance, and so what will happen is nobody does this in small markets. Take your little FM transmitter that's in a Jeep, okay, take it down to [unclear] Shoe Store and do a little spot with him, interviewing some of his customers. Take it over to the Oldsmobile dealer, okay, and let him tell you about his cars. So not only did we sell remotes to sponsors, broadcast from there, we set them up and had not a window kind of a layout, but we had the little thing there, and we had a table, and we had the microphones, and the guy would—whatever the personality was, it was usually me, or I also had another guy who had gone to Chico State, and he really wanted to be an air guy. So at the same time, I benefitted by using him.

And so one of the interesting things that came out of all that was that we didn't need landlines to do anything we wanted to do in that little town. We would do our broadcast of our high school games, basketball and football, and then yours truly would be the announcer, the play-by-play announcer for all of that. And then when the Oroville Olives semipro baseball team wanted the Trolley League to get more attention, they came to me and said, "Would you broadcast our games? We don't like Phil Talbotser [phonetic]," who was doing the games. "He's too critical. We want a guy who is friendly," and [demonstrates]. He didn't make me a homer [phonetic], but neither was I an announcer who was criticizing the play of the second baseball, the play of the outfielder, the pitching who couldn't get the ball over the plate. [Laughs] And so Talbotser lost the job. He was the sportswriter for the *Oroville Mercury*, and that's how he got the job. He didn't get it because he could announce or anything or knew anything about broadcasting.

So I replaced him, so I had extra money that I could charge off against the games. In the summer, of course, it was the Olives because they played at night. They had night lights there. And then during the high school period, I'd do all the football games and basketball games, okay?

[00:56:54]

Biondi: How did you find your way to Sacramento from there? Because that's where you went next, right, from Oroville to Sacramento?

[00:57:01]

Coppola: The lady who runs the house was the accounting and office manager of KMOR.

[00:57:15]

Biondi: In Oroville.

[00:57:17]

Coppola: In Oroville. She and I got together, we started dating, okay? One thing led to another and she finally said—and I didn't even think about this. I was almost thirty years old, but I was thinking about, "Gee, I'd sure like to maybe have a family and figure something out here." And about that time, she said—she didn't tell me this, but she surprised me by saying, "I got a job at Channel 10. Lou, I'm going to leave Oroville."

[00:57:57]

Biondi: Channel 10 in Sacramento?

[00:58:01]

Coppola: That's right. She was going to be the traffic manager with another person—not the traffic manager. She was going to be an assistant traffic manager. "I can make more money." So I congratulated her, and she went to work in November. And on January third or fourth or fifth, two months later, Lou decided, "I'd better engage this girl."

[*Laughter*] So that's how I got to Sacramento was because she was working at 10, and I was up in Oroville and I wasn't going to stay away from her, not after all of the interesting things that we had done. So I simply said, "Okay, dear," and I surprised her, I said, "I want you to marry me," get engaged. So we got engaged, and we then decided to work out what we can.

[00:59:07]

Biondi: Were your parents still alive then?

[00:59:09]

Coppola: Yes. My father passed away in '69. My mother passed away in 1971.

[00:59:21]

Biondi: You went to them and told them you were going to get married?

[00:59:25]

Coppola: Oh, yes. Oh, sure. And they had her come down to our house in Concord, and they liked her and she liked them, and so we got married in June. But here's the kicker. When we had to tell Bob Kelly that we were engaged and we were going to get married, he says, "Uh-oh."

[00:59:52]

Biondi: Now, you were working at KCRA at the time?

[00:59:53]

Coppola: I was hired by Bob Kelly, because I came down to be in Oroville, and a guy by the name of Richards was the sales manager for Channel 40 in those days, so I went to see him the first chance I got. I didn't even think about the networks, KABK or any of those. So instead, I went over there to see him, and he said, "No, if you're from Oroville, there's no way that you can sell Channel 40. You don't know anything about television," and da, da, da, da. "It's real hard to do, real hard to do."

"But I know selling."

"I don't care. No, no, no."

Funny part of it is, later on, when I was selling for KCRA, Richards had lost his job and he was the advertising manager for Breuner's Furniture Store, and he had to buy time from me. *[Laughter]* It was about seven or eight years later.

But Bob Kelly then said, "Lou, we're going to have to—." Oh, I know what. Something happened to the traffic manager at KCRA, 1320, and so Bob Kelly says, "Didn't your wife work in Oroville as manager in traffic and made the logs and all that?"

"Sure."

"Well, why don't we hire her in the spot where what's-her-name's going to leave?"

So here I am, working, engaged to Betty, she is the traffic manager now of 1320, and I'm over here selling time and doing sports, a few things like that. And what'll happen is, we don't know this until Bob Kelly finds out we're engaged and that we're going to get married, and he says, "She can't work for us. We don't allow married couples at the same station." This was way before Dave Walker and Lois Hart and all the other things that happened later on in life.

[01:02:40]

Biondi: Did he tell you why?

[01:02:42]

Coppola: Well, yeah. They don't know whether it's favoritism or nepotism or whatever it is, but if you have in the same department, in other words, the radio department, you're going to have friction between other individuals—

[01:03:01]

Biondi: When you went to KCRA, did Betty have to quit?

[01:03:07]

Coppola: She did and—

[01:03:10]

Betty Coppola: Truly, I did. I was there for a few months, and KCRA had the policy they didn't want husbands and wives employed at the same time.

[01:03:19]

Coppola: Yeah.

[01:03:20]

Biondi: So she quit?

[01:03:21]

Coppola: She quit. She had to. But before she quit, we got married, and she worked ten days in advance of our honeymoon so that we would have ten beautiful days together in Victoria and Harrison Lake, British Columbia. We had the most beautiful time there. And I have just found the pictures of our reunion, fiftieth reunion, where we went back to Harrison Lake, and it had changed. When we went to Harrison Lake, we were the third couple staying at this resort. We had all the help of the kitchen to spoil us. We had horseback riding, we had boating, we had everything you could ever want at a resort, but the crowd had not come from Seattle. They had not moved there, because they came in usually late June or July.

[01:04:30]

Biondi: When you look back on your career, especially when it became very professional and very specific here in Sacramento, how did you mix that with your family? You were a broadcaster. And the time, the demands on your time and in your profession, what effect was that on your family?

[01:04:53]

Coppola: Didn't hurt, because Betty stayed with Chuck eighteen-plus years before she went back to work. She went first back to get her schooling at City College, and then, in turn, she went over to get her geography diploma from Davis to teach. It was the year that the state stopped geography as a required subject. So she had to get a new career, and so she said, "What am I going to do? What am I going to do?" So first she got

connected with—let me think now. Oh, she heard about ESL, and she said, “Maybe I can specialize in ESL. But where am I going to get it?” Well, UCLA wanted a ton of money and two and a half years of time. University of Arizona said, “We can do it in eighteen months.”

[01:06:09]

Biondi: So if you had to look at your career now where you’re a professional, accomplished salesperson at KCRA, how do you look at those forty years you spent there?

[01:06:23]

Coppola: Well, I think it was the growth of me with, in turn, the ability to reach across and get the sales community so friendly that they wanted me to open an advertising agency with them. And, in fact, I did, at the same time I was selling, okay? I had an advertising agency that had Yancy Company [phonetic], Hubacher Cadillac, South City Honda, Patterson Travel, Independent Insurance Agents of Sacramento. I had about seven or eight, and there were others that wanted me to handle their stuff, but I couldn’t do it.

[01:07:19]

Biondi: No conflict with your position at KCRA?

[01:07:21]

Coppola: No. Well, yes, after two years I had a little SOB who felt threatened, and he had John Drew Motors [phonetic] at the time, and he was very upset that I had Hubacher and a few others, and I was giving him down a shaft. I mean, he wanted everything that he could get, but he didn’t want me being on the street at the same time. I’m trying to think of his name. Anyway, he went to the Kellys, and this is before they had sold the station to Tribune, okay, and he went to the Kellys and he, in turn, between the Kellys going to my sales manager—Harvey Fisher [phonetic] was my sales manager at the time, and he kept telling me, “Oh, they’re really after you, Lou. He wants to get you, and he’s spreading the word all over town that the Kellys are letting you be a sales agent with your own agency on the side and taking money away from individuals who have nothing but their business.”

So that’s how I got out of really aggressively feeling—and it came to a close about the time that the Yancy Company hired me for almost a year, paid me an awful good salary, fifty-grand at the time, to run their sales department. You know the Yancy Company’s background. They had fifty roofers, they had a sales staff of ten salesmen, and they wanted me to drop all the agency ties I had. I stayed for one year, and when Yancy Company had to say to me, “Lou, we’ve got to make a change. We can’t keep you, pay you, and we have a man who will drive down from Grass Valley who used to work for us, and he can be the sales manager, and we’ll have to—.” I was getting static from Tom

Yancy because Tom felt threatened by me and he just didn't like the idea that I had an agency on the side while working for them, see, because I didn't drop all my clients, no.

[01:10:18]

Biondi: Oh, I see.

[01:10:19]

Coppola: Because they were so good-paying clients, and I was saying, "Look, if you can make fifty, pick up another twenty-five to fifty, you're in heaven." So I didn't want to drop them.

But then Tribune Company said, "No, we're going to have to have you drop all the agency accounts. You'll still retain all of your good accounts that you always had. They'll be still under your control for the AM Radio station." And that's when I got also at that time a very nice change. Bill Zimlick [phonetic], do you remember Bill?

[01:11:08]

Biondi: I do.

[01:11:09]

Coppola: Bill Zimlick came over, and Bill was—I'm trying to think. Bill was program director of 1320. One of the things he said, "Lou, you've traveled a lot. You know this background backwards and forwards, and you've got a number of travel companies that you have been close to, which many times you sell packages and then you involve them as a group. Why don't you do a whole travel show and take over the weekends? You run all the weekend talk shows, okay, and you do your show and we'll pay you full bore, and you won't have any accounts to take care of. All you can do is sell if you want to sell the weekend shows that involve financial, home improvement, just all those kind of things. And in the travel show, your travel show will stand alone, but the weekend will have a series of talk show hosts, each of them a specialist who will answer things connected with all fields, and you can just control them and show them how to use the microphones. But you're going to be the engineer for all their shows."

[01:12:59]

Biondi: And you traveled with that, too, didn't you?

[01:13:01]

Coppola: Oh, I traveled. Oh, that, when I did the travel shows, I would put packages together where I would go to Hawaii. Do you remember Lena Fat [phonetic]?

[01:13:16]

Biondi: Mm-hmm.

[01:13:16]

Coppola: One of the best trips that I ever made with a group was taking thirty people to Lena Fat in February during the big food festival. Oh!

[01:13:29]

Biondi: How'd you get it on the air? Did you record it?

[01:13:34]

Coppola: How did I record what?

[01:13:35]

Biondi: Did you record it or did you put it on the air, or you just did the travel?

[01:13:37]

Coppola: I did the talk—oh, no, I did the talk show. I was the host. It was my travel show.

[01:13:41]

Biondi: Did you record it?

[01:13:43]

Coppola: Yes.

[01:13:44]

Biondi: Ah, okay.

[01:13:46]

Coppola: I either recorded it or I did it live if I had to do—on my travel show, I also did interviews and entertainment features, like when I got close to the big band era and I'd been asked by the Nut Tree to help salute their sixty-fifth anniversary, well, I simply said, "What do you want?"

"We want the Glenn Miller show band." [*Laughter*]

So, believe it or not, the big story was, okay, how do I get a hold of the Glenn—well, I knew booking companies, booking agencies that were representing these different bands and things, so I said, "Okay, I'll check with the booking agency for the Glenn Miller Tribute Orchestra and see what it runs and what the time period."

"We want him for the 3rd and 4th of July. We want to have a 3rd dance at night, and a 4th with fireworks. We'll take care of the fireworks. You just get the band to play for three hours or more." [*Laughs*] And so \$65,000 to bring the Glenn Miller Band to the Nut Tree and take care of their accommodations in the nearby hotels, pay for the plane tickets for the entire band to fly from Detroit, okay. And it worked out beautifully, and

I've got pictures of the band. Where do you think we got the band shell from? Where would you get a band shell which would hold a fifteen-piece band with levels and everything?

[01:15:55]

Biondi: From a movie company.

[01:15:56]

Coppola: Well, you'd have to rent something from Hollywood. Ashland, Oregon.

[01:16:04]

Biondi: Ashland, Oregon, from the Shakespeare Festival.

[01:16:08]

Coppola: That's right, because they had stages that they could bring down, and that's what they did. They came down and set up a stage, and it stayed there for July, Tommy Dorsey for August, Count Basie for September.

[01:16:25]

Biondi: How did you get start to lead the Big Band Society that you started? What led you to do that?

[01:16:32]

Coppola: For years, I was active at the Elks, and I was talked into that by a guy by the name of Joe Mayer [phonetic], and he and Lockwood Vogle [phonetic] were two of the exalted rulers, and they knew that I knew a lot of band people. And so they said, "We want to book at our Elks temple these good bands once a month and, in turn, New Year's Eve."

"Oh, okay." And so I then became very close to the Bill Rases, the Buddy Harphams, the George Brunos, and some of the other bands that were around.

[01:17:27]

Biondi: When it came time, when did you realize that you had done enough and you wanted to start thinking about retirement?

[01:17:37]

Coppola: Well, the retirement came in '96, and it was done by the fact that they took away the weekend job that I had, because the station was sold by the Tribune Company to a company called Henry Enterprises out of Portland, Oregon. They had five or four stations along the coast, and they bought this as—I don't know what they bought it for, but they bought the AM side. The FM side was sold to the station that at that time was running KXOA, and they, in turn, said, "We're going to be separate." And that's when

the change took place that made me know that something was not going to work in the future.

So with Henry Broadcasting not interested in my weekend talk shows at all, they want to play music, and, in fact, Henry came down with his wife and they raided the library of the AM station, I mean cleaned out all the good LPs that they wanted, and then they said, "We're going to try to sell the station." They bought it as an investment and they wanted to flip it, and they did. In less than a year, they flipped the station.

So I was left out in the cold because I'd lost my thing, and so at that time, why, this was in '96, and I forget what the hell I did. Well, I had a couple of good accounts that I still—oh, the other account that I was very close to was Capital Nursery, and Capital Nursery, I was their voice. I'd been their voice on everything. I was paid well. And so I got, in turn, that job continuing. And I forget what else I got.

[01:20:01]

Biondi: You did some production and voiceover work at that point.

[01:20:03]

Coppola: Yeah. I was doing some of that kind of stuff. And then in 1999, well, along the way there were some instances where they—because of the success I'd had with the Glenn Miller Tribute Orchestra and I had these ties to the booking agencies, they kept feeding me ideas of who to bring and so forth and so on. I started with the Jazz Jubilee as my other love for music and emceeing with the Jazz Jubilee Bill Borchard [phonetic], we struck gold between he and I. And he said, "I'll make sure that we have a good lineup of talent that will play every Sunday if you'll be the emcee for the whole day, and we'll use the Hyatt Regency and we'll pack the place, 1,200 all through the day. You come in at 10:00 a.m. in the morning and you stay until 11:00 p.m. at night, and I'll let you get what you want for all that."

And so that showed me that there was a place for the big band music and the music of the forties and the thirties, that people were hungry for it. I had people that came from San Diego, single women that would come from San Diego or from Portland or from Reno. They would come to our Jazz Jubilee, and they would stay not only the one day, the Sunday, but they would come and stay there on Friday and Saturday because they knew that we would have a tremendous day on Sunday. And so with that tie to the Jazz Jubilee, I start to know even closer the Bill Rases and the—well, Bill Rase worked for 1320.

[01:22:21]

Biondi: Right. Now, if you look back when retirement came, think back on how you looked at your life and your career when retirement came.

[01:22:31]

Coppola: The real retirement came when I was antsy and I wanted to prove something, and the prove was that there was still a place in this community of Northern California with the sources of newspapers and the sources of radio stations to have a place where people could come and be able to hear the music that they either grew up with as teenagers or as parents or as grandparents.

[01:23:07]

Biondi: How'd you look back at your career, though? How did you look back on that?

[01:23:12]

Coppola: Well, I felt it just meshed all together, and I thought this was the crown of all of this tie of radio and entertainment and happy people getting out and having fellowship and friendship together.

[01:23:31]

Biondi: You were a good showman, weren't you?

[01:23:32]

Coppola: Yeah, I guess so. The main thing I liked about this was that I got to wear a tuxedo every month. *[Laughter]* And since Betty was taking all the money at the counter at the front desk, I trapped her on that, and she just hated it. But she was not a real nut on swing dancing or anything like that.

[01:23:59]

Biondi: The little boy from Uzio [phonetic]. *[Laughs]*

[01:24:01]

Coppola: Yeah, yeah. And so I had all of the ladies who wanted to dance, with my knowledge of the different steps, to entertain me during the three hours or more that the band played.

[01:24:18]

Biondi: Let me tell you that you have a fascinating story, and it's been a pleasure to listen to it, and I want to thank you for giving us this time. It's been a real pleasure. I've known you for a long time, and it's been even more interesting to find out what you did and who you were.

[01:24:40]

Coppola: Well, I ran across a lot of people who have interesting lives in their own right, and I think that's what I enjoy about being in America. I enjoy being in a community about the size of Sacramento, to watch it grow—